

EVA RIZZIN TALKS ABOUT THE PAST AND PRESENT OF ANTIGYPSYISM

My name is Eva Rizzin and I am an Italian Sinta woman and Sinti and Roma people are improperly called Gypsies and Nomads. Both, however, are derogatory terms because they are given from outsiders, that is, by non-Roma and non-Sinti people to a group of people who prefer, as anyone does, to call themselves by their own names. “Gypsies” is like “Zigeuner”, a word used in Nazi and Fascist times which refers to all the stereotypes and prejudices that were used then. Prejudices that assumed Gypsies to be automatically nomadic and anti-social. And this was told to me as a child by my grandfather, who was very proud of our origins. And he cared about this definition. He would tell me you are a Sinta, you should never call yourself by that name there. By the way, it is a term that does not even exist in our language. There is no translation for this term - it is a heteronym that is imposed on us by the majority of society. Um, I am an Italian Sinti person, I belong to a big family of Sinti people, a Sinta family of German origin. And whose last names are Lemman and Reinhard. My family emigrated to Italy at the end of the 1800s because in Germany even then, at the end of the 1800s, there was active persecution against Roma and Sinti people. It was a big family, the Lemman and Reinhard family. It was a large family of German Sinti who were therefore victims first of the pre-Nazi persecution that took place in the late 1800s, then of the German Nazi persecution, but also then of the Italian Fascist persecution. And as I was telling you, when they came to Germany in the late 1800s they were victims of a considerable anti-Gypsy sentiment that was active precisely in the area of Bavaria. Some members of my family after this experience in Germany, after they escaped from Germany, were arrested, deported to Italian concentration camps and Nazi death camps. These events were told to me from a very young age by my grandfather. These narratives were then confirmed by recent historical research that has been conducted. A persecution that began in the late 1800s in Bavaria and found its climax with the Nazi and Fascist persecution in both Germany and Italy.

It's a history of both Italian and European origins, so it is a history that straddles two nations: Germany and Italy. In 1905 what happened in Bavaria? Alfred Hilmann, head of the German police force in Bavaria, organised one of the largest ethnic profiling ever made against the Sinti. He will manage to document, I think, 3350 Bavarian Sinti. He included a list of names in the book *Zigeuner buchen* that would prove most useful to



the Third Reich in then initiating later deportation to concentration camps. And also made a detailed filing of Sinti as dangerous people regardless of individual behaviour. The inclusion of minors also shows this. He did not limit himself to cataloguing but also put in place deportation practices. My great-great-grandfather. My great-grandfather was included in that book and fled to Italy, and other members of my family instead stayed in Germany. And to understand what their fate was, one only has to consult the ledger of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Gypsy camp and Rainer Lehmann. There are hundreds among the internees. My ancestors came to Piedmont in the late 1800s, where they established a circus called Zaza. It was a family of circus people, lute makers and musicians. They were not dangerous people, as Alfred Hillman wanted to make people believe. What happened next? That the path of escape from Germany did not, however, prevent members of my family from the persecution that would occur a few decades later in Italy with the Fascist persecution. The Sinti and Roma people in Italy were deported to concentration camps that arose in Italy from the mid-1940s, again as a direct consequence of Italian fascism and concepts of racial inferiority. This is to say that our country, Italy, together with Nazi Germany, was responsible for the concentration, deportation and extermination of hundreds, thousands of Roma and Sinti people. Roma and Sinti people, when they arrived in Europe as early as 1300, they were objects of ethnocidal policies that aimed at assimilation, cultural and identity annihilation of our communities and subjected to ethnic profiling and censuses. This has always been a feature of the past. Unfortunately, however, it has also been a feature of our present, which has characterised precisely anti-gypsyism.

Anti-gypsyism is one of the most widespread forms of contemporary European racism and is one of the least known about and least studied, and has been for too long a phenomenon kept hidden in Europe. And anti-gypsyism is also characterised precisely by, let's say also institutional characteristics. I never thought that I would be faced with ethnic profiling in 2008. 2007-2008 are years when media attention on Roma and Sinti people in Italy reached levels born particularly in January 2007 when Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union. Romanian Roma and non-Roma migrants but in general Roma and Sinti people began to occupy more and more space in the news in national newspapers but also in other types of publications. In those years what happened was that special legislative measures were taken against Roma and Sinti people and this happened after a serious news event - a tragic death of a woman in Rome on October 30, 2007. And the climax then came the following year in May 2008



when in the Ponticelli neighbourhood of Naples we witnessed a real pogrom starting with the false accusation that an underage Romani woman had tried to steal a child.

And it was there that a group of Italian citizens armed with sticks attacked a settlement inhabited by Roma people by throwing Molotov bombs and actually carrying out a real pogrom. And I think that as a result of these events on May 21, 2008, the greatest institutional discrimination in recent years against Roma and Sinti people in Italy took place. The Prime Minister at the time declared a state of emergency in relation to the settlements of nomadic communities in several regions: Lombardy, Campania, and Lazio in 2009 extended to Piedmont and Veneto. And what happened through this special measure, this declaration of emergency towards people who are identified after years and years still in the stereotype of nomadism? Declaration towards nomadic people. In the face of these ordinances numerous Roma and Sinti people are being surveyed through fingerprinting. And think that at that historical moment some official documents were collected with the official header of the Commissioner for the emergency defined as nomads. And it is a document that subverts our constitutional principles starting with Article Three of our Constitution which, I remember, is supposed to guarantee formal and substantive equality of all citizens.

But in that document what is being asked for besides fingerprints? It asks about religion and ethnicity. There was a real ethnic census in 2008 that was denounced by the European Parliament with a specific resolution. Anyone of you can find the reference on the internet about a resolution of July 10, 2008 on the census of Roma on ethnic basis in Italy. Just think 2008 was supposed to be the year of equal opportunities for us Sinti and Roma people. Instead it will remain the year of ethnic filing and ethnic census and let's say disrespect of our constitutional principles.

